

Chapter 8

Remember the Importance of the Human Touch

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Technology can be simply amazing. There are so many things we can do today that were unimaginable even 10 years ago. During this age of innovation, more and more people are arguing about the importance of integrating new technologies into our courses. Just one example is the “[ASCD Smartbrief](#)” (ASCD, n.d.), a weekly online publication from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). This publication dedicates a section in every issue to celebrating recent applications of technology in educational settings. Headlines include: “Online Games Teach Business Strategies to High-school Students”, “iPod Touch Helps Florida Students Spend More Time on Math” and “Many iPad Applications May Be Tools for Educators.” However, as we push forward and find new ways to integrate the latest and greatest technology into our courses, we cannot forget the importance of the human touch.

Background

When I first heard about online education, it sounded very impersonal. And to be honest, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to have anything to do with it. But before jumping to any firm conclusions, I decided to learn more about it in an effort to make an educated decision about whether or not online education made personal and pedagogical sense to me. I signed up to participate in Summer Web Camp—a weeklong event hosted by CU Online at the University of Colorado Denver to help support faculty while developing an online course (see Lowenthal & Thomas, 2010 for more information on Web Camp). Participating in Summer Web Camp was an amazing introduction for me to online education. I left Web Camp believing in the power and possibility of online education and specifically believing that I could teach online. But at the same time, I also recognized and still believed in the power of teaching certain things in a face-to-face setting. I teach teachers how to teach and, while this can be done online, I strongly believe it is more effective and efficient to have some face-to-face class sessions to model certain behaviors for my students. Because of this, when the time came for me to begin teaching online, I began teaching hybrid courses—rather than fully online—because I wanted to leverage the strengths of both online and face-to-face learning environments.

During my first semester teaching a hybrid course, three of my 15 sessions were face-to-face. I carefully chose what activities would be done in our face-to-face sessions versus those that would be done online. For example, if there were certain strategies or behaviors that I wanted to physically model for students, I planned those for the face-to-face sessions. I challenged myself to develop online activities that would accomplish the same goals that I had set when I was teaching the class in a traditional face-to-face format. For instance, there were many times when I would have small groups meet to do an activity in my face-to-face class and I found that I could have the students do something similar by having them participate in a threaded discussion that was specific to their group. This was a really interesting process because it forced me to look carefully at my content and decide which method (face-to-face or online) was the best

fit for each of my teaching activities. But it also forced me to wrestle with how to maintain a human touch in the online portions of my courses. In the following pages, I briefly explain some of the strategies that I use to add a personal touch to an online or hybrid course.

Adding a Human Touch When Teaching Online

Online learning has been characterized as impersonal and isolating. In ways people tend to think of hybrid courses as addressing part of this problem through the combination of time spent face-to-face and online. But it is way too easy when teaching a hybrid course to assume that all affective types of communication will take place during the face-to-face sessions. The following are some strategies I use to add the human touch to my hybrid courses (but they all are equally applicable to fully online courses).

Pick Up the Phone

I strive to call each student before class begins or shortly thereafter. As useful as email can be, I believe that individually calling students on the phone adds a human touch to my courses. I make sure students know when class begins and how to access the class. I also remind my students about tutorials that are available to help them with the online tools we use (i.e., eCollege and LiveText) in class. Many times, I have to leave messages, but I believe this is still helpful because my students know that I have reached out to them and they can hear my voice (see Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2010 for more on this type of strategy).

Post Pictures Online

I ask each student to post a picture of him or herself in an online threaded discussion or through a social networking site. Even in hybrid courses where you eventually meet face-to-face, I think it's important to put a face with a name. During my first few interactions with each student, I look at his/her picture so I know exactly who I am responding to and remember to add that human touch whenever I can. I also think it's important for students to be able to put names and stories with the faces of their classmates. I have my picture posted in the online syllabus so students can see my face and I also post a picture in the discussion to model for them how to post their picture online.

When I teach a hybrid course, I use the students' pictures to memorize each of their names so that I can greet them by name when I see them for the first time in the face-to-face session. This, too, is one of the behaviors—because I teach teachers how to teach—that I like to model for my students. In an elementary or secondary classroom, knowing students' names is extremely helpful for classroom management. In a post-secondary setting, it is important for developing rapport with your students.

Learn About Your Students

I believe it's really important to learn as much as you can about your students—especially when teaching online when so much of the valuable chit-chat that happens before and after a class and on breaks is missing. I strive to know about my students' interests, what they like to do outside of class, and so forth. This is one of the behaviors that I believe is so important to model for my students because the more we know about our students, the better we can design our instruction to meet their needs.

At the beginning of each semester, I facilitate a discussion where I ask students to tell the class a bit about themselves. As I read the discussion, I make notes for myself

about each student so I can refer to them later. As I find out what students' interests are, I can make personal connections with them. If we have a common interest, we can bond around that. If a student has an interest in something that is new to me, I can develop rapport by having that student teach me a bit about the subject. Also, if a student shares that he or she is a single parent, I know that there may be times when family issues must come before school issues. The information I learn about students helps me better understand and interact with them.

Prior Experience Learning Online

Learning online is strange and foreign to many students. I always ask students about their prior experience learning online because I find that typically those who are brand new to online learning struggle the most. Finding out how many courses they have taken online helps me to identify which students may need additional support.

At the beginning of the semester, I also send out an e-mail to all students and ask them to reply with the answers to questions like "How many online courses have you taken?" and "Why did you choose to take this course online?" I ask students to respond in a private e-mail for two reasons: (a) it helps us check the e-mail system to make sure everything is working properly and (b) answers to these questions might be more personal for students and might better be done one-on-one than in a threaded discussion.

Comfort with Technology

The more advanced we are with our technological skills, the easier it is for us to forget what it's like to be less comfortable with technology. Each time I teach, I try to find out how comfortable each student is with using technology. Technological proficiency is often a hidden curriculum with online learning. We often assume that our students are proficient in the use of technology but this isn't always the case. We need to remember that some students may need more detailed instructions for some activities.

Survey Students

Another strategy I use is that I survey my students during the first few weeks of the course (using a tool like SurveyMonkey.com) to collect feedback on how things are going. Done anonymously; students give me feedback to help improve our course. I make a point of summarizing the feedback and sharing it with students so they know that their voices have been heard. I then use the feedback from the students to make mid-course adjustments. For example, during one survey, I learned that many students preferred to do their online work over the weekend. As a result of this information, I changed the sessions to stay open until Sunday rather than closing them on Saturday. Students appreciate being able to give feedback about the course.

Comment to Every Student

I don't think it's necessary to reply to each student every time he or she posts in the discussion threads. However, I do think it is important to comment to every student in a course. Therefore, I strive to occasionally comment to every student to ensure that I don't leave anyone out. I believe that this shows my active participation and provides a connection to each student. In my experience, students appreciate knowing that faculty members have taken an active role in the discussion and students appreciate the individual attention. I keep a checklist so I can make sure that I respond to each

student. (This is a time when I refer back to students' photos. I like to see whom I'm responding to.)

Personalize Grading

Another way that I try to add a human touch is by personalizing my grading. I specifically try to do this when I am grading students' discussions. I have found that this shows students that I have read what they wrote and that I'm making connections with them. Private responses allow me to provide more personalized feedback than if I were responding in a threaded discussion.

When I grade the discussion in eCollege, I give each student a numeric score and add comments in the comment box. My comments may include something that specifically relates to the student's post, they might pose an extending question, or they might connect to something I learned about them in the discussion at the beginning of the semester. This is one more opportunity to connect with my students.

Keep Track of Assignments

The accountability of turning in an assignment in a face-to-face class is different than in an online class. Unlike in a face-to-face course where students typically turn in their work to a person, at a certain time—students online typically turn in their work individually at different times of the day and often privately. In my experience, it is easy for students to forget to turn in an assignment, to turn it in the wrong place, or to submit it in the wrong format. I use a checklist when I teach online to make sure that students have completed the tasks that I've asked them to and I follow up with them when something is missing. This type of accountability keeps an online class in the forefront for those students who might occasionally forget about it. Further, it provides a bit of human touch in an environment where students might sometimes feel isolated and alone.

Timely Response to emails

Because students do not see their instructor on a regular basis, they need to know that, if they email their instructor that they can count on a timely response. Sometimes they need information before they can proceed with an assignment, other times they just need support and encouragement. I know that some instructors use Twitter as another way to respond to questions in a timely manner (see Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009); regardless of the tool for communicating, students need to know that they will hear back from their instructor.

Concluding Thoughts

Technology offers many amazing resources and we, as online instructors, should continue to learn about the latest tools and integrate new strategies into our instruction. But in addition to using current technology, we should also challenge ourselves to make sure that our courses have a human touch. If you are hoping to enhance the human touch in your course, I suggest beginning with learning as much as you can about your students and connecting your instruction to their needs. Brain research tells us that students learn best when they are able to make personal connections with the content; getting to know our students is the first step in the process.

My experience has shown that students greatly appreciate the fact that I take time to get to know them and connect my instruction to each of them. My course surveys and FCQs have shown that the additional time it takes to add a human touch is well

worth the effort. Regardless of your content area, I encourage you to continue to use the latest and greatest in technology, and also to remember the importance of the human touch.

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Bio

Kelly Bergman has been an educator for 19 years. She earned her bachelor's degree in Elementary and Middle School Education from the University of Northern Colorado, a Master's degree in Whole Learning from Regis University and an Administrative Certificate from the University of Denver. As a teacher, mentor, and principal in elementary schools, Kelly has always been known for helping others make sense of complex materials and tasks. Most recently, she has had the privilege of teaching teacher candidates at UC Denver.